

The Problem of Search for Identity in *Light in August* and *Absalom, Absalom!*

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I

The problem of search for identity is one of the main problems which are related to modern people's minds. It is closely connected with human alienation. In the present world, people are apt to lose their free will because of the extreme development of a machine civilization, and they often lose sight of their identity and feel isolated and alienated. Therefore, the problem of search for identity is an important theme to study. In this short essay, I would like to consider the problem of search for identity in two main novels of Faulkner, *Light in August* and *Absalom, Absalom!*

II

When Joe Christmas appears in the story for the first time, he seems to be an isolated man:

He did not look like a professional hobo in his professional rags, but there was something definitely rootless about him, as though no town nor city was his, no street, no walls, no square of earth his home. And that he carried his knowledge with him always as though it were a banner, with a quality ruthless, lonely, and almost proud¹⁾.

Christmas already has one of the causes of isolation from his childhood. He did not know his parents. His father was killed by his grandfather, Eupheus Hines, before his mother gave birth to him. His mother died as soon as she gave birth to him. Since he doesn't know his parents, he doesn't know who he is. That is to say, he doesn't know his own identity. And Christmas' lack of knowledge about his identity is one of the causes of his isolation.

Besides his lack of knowledge about his parents, he has a big problem in relation to his identity. There was a suspicion that his father might have had some Negro blood. But whether Christmas' father was a Negro or not is quite uncertain. Christmas' mother, Milly, said that he was a Mexican. According to Mrs. Hines, Christmas' grandmother, "it was just that circus man that said he was a nigger and maybe he never knew for certain."²⁾ Only Eupheus Hines says that he "could see in his face the black curse of God Almighty."³⁾ Therefore Christmas is "free to choose what he will be."⁴⁾ Nevertheless, Eupheus Hines makes Christmas convinced that he has some Negro blood in him. Eupheus Hines takes Christmas to an orphanage in secret when he is a baby. He gets a job of a janitor there and always watches Christmas. When Christmas is a child, the other children call him Nigger,

and he comes to play alone. Then Eupheus Hines tries to make Christmas believe that he has some Negro blood in him :

... and old Doc Hines said to him, "Why dont you play with them other children like you used to?" and he didn't say nothing and old Doc Hines said, "Is it because they call you nigger?" and he didn't say nothing and old Doc Hines said, "Do you think you are a nigger because God has marked your face?"⁵⁾

Because of this, Christmas comes to think he has some Negro blood in him. Throughout his life, he keeps on thinking that he has some Negro blood in him. This, as well as lack of knowledge about his parents, is one of the causes of his isolation. Christmas doesn't know whether he has some Negro blood or not. He believes that he has. That is, he doesn't know which he is, a Negro or a white. Accordingly, all through his life, he "demands to know whether he is black or white."⁶⁾ And he must search for his identity to the end of his life.

Faulkner describes Christmas' uncertain identity symbolically as follows :

In the quiet and empty corridor, during the quiet hour of early afternoon, he was like a shadow, small even for five years, sober and quiet as a shadow. Another in the corridor could not have said just when and where he vanished, into what door, what room.⁷⁾

What the black worker in the orphanage says to Christmas predicts his lifelong search in isolation for identity : "You are worse than that. You don't know what you are. And more than that, you wont never know. You'll live and you'll die and you won't never know."⁸⁾ Christmas keeps on searching for his identity for fifteen years after he has killed his foster father, Simon McEachern at a dance. Nevertheless, he never knows what he is until he is killed by Percy Grimm.

His lifelong search for identity is symbolically shown by the word "street." After he is beaten up by Bobbie Allen's fellows he enters the "street" :

He stepped from the dark porch, into the moonlight, and with his bloody head and his empty stomach hot, savage and courageous with whiskey, he entered the street which was to run for fifteen years.⁹⁾

This street runs to many places, Oklahoma, Missouri, Mexico, Chicago, Detroit, and at last to Mississippi. During fifteen years, he shares the same bed with many women. Once he lies in the same bed with a white prostitute and tells her that he is a Negro. As he doesn't look like a Negro, she stares at his face and screams. After that he comes to fight the Negro who calls him white, though he fought the white who called him a Negro before. He lives "with negroes, shunning white people."¹⁰⁾ And he lives "as man and wife with a woman" who resembles "an ebony carving."¹¹⁾ At night, when he lies in bed beside her, he tries to "breathe into himself the dark odor, the dark and inscrutable thinking and being of negroes,"¹²⁾ but he can't :

And all the while his nostrils at the odor which he was trying to make his own would whiten and tauten, his whole being writhe and strain with physical outrage and spiritual denial.¹³⁾

Because of his instinctive dislike for the Negro, he can't get along well with Negroes.

Faulkner describes Christmas' instinctive dislike for the Negro also in another part of the story. His instinctive dislike for the Negro shows when Christmas walks through the Negro section Freedman Town, at the night when he decides to kill Joanna Burden :

He turned into it running and plunged up the sharp ascent, his heart hammering, and into the higher street. He stopped here, panting, glaring, his heart thudding as if it could not or would not yet believe that the air now was the cold hard air of white people.¹⁴⁾

However, Christmas can't be on good terms with white people. He is regarded not as Joe Christmas but as an abstract Negro by white people in the South. In the South, white people never accept individuality of Negroes. They regard Negroes not as individuals but as a group. But as Christmas doesn't know what he is and whether he has some Negro blood or not, and as he searches for his identity, he can't admit that he is a Negro. However, he is not a white. At least he doesn't think that he is a white. Thus he can't mix with white people. Faulkner describes his isolation among white people symbolically and effectively. At the night when he decides to kill Joanna Burden, while he walks between the houses of white people, he looks like "a phantom, a spirit, strayed out of its own world, and lost."¹⁵⁾ Judging from these facts above mentioned, we find that Christmas can become neither a Negro nor a white.

Throughout fifteen years Christmas searches for his identity and seeks to become an individual. He wants to escape from being an abstract Negro. Therefore, as Alfred Kazin says, he is "an abstraction seeking to become a human being."¹⁶⁾ When Joanna Burden, who regards him abstractly as a Negro, presses for his marriage to her, Christmas thinks "No. If I give in now, I will deny all the thirty years that I have lived to make me what I chose to be."¹⁷⁾ In order to marry her, he has to admit his Negro blood and he has to become a Negro. If he wants to be what he chose to be, he can't admit that he is a Negro.

What he really wants throughout his life is not a violent life but a common peaceful life, in other words, "human reconciliation."¹⁸⁾ At the night when he decides to kill Joanna Burden, while he walks between the houses of white people, looking at four people playing cards on a lighted veranda, Christmas thinks, "That's all I wanted," and "That dont seem like a whole lot to ask."¹⁹⁾ In the midst of his flight after he killed Joanna Burden, Christmas thinks in peaceful, quiet nature :

He breathes deep and slow, feeling with each breath himself diffuse in the neutral grayness, becoming one with loneliness and quiet that has never known fury or despair. "That was all I wanted," he thinks, in a quiet and slow amazement. "That was all, for thirty years. That didn't seem to be a whole lot to ask in thirty years."²⁰⁾

Christmas' isolation begins when he is only a child because of his lack of knowledge about his own identity. After he has grown up he searches for his identity and tries to become a human being. Nevertheless, he can't become a human being until he is killed. It is ironical for Christmas to put on a black brogan smelling of Negro before he is killed. This black brogan predicts that he dies as a Negro. Until his death, he is forced to be an abstract Negro by his environment. Thus, he can never escape from his isolation. Judging

from these facts, it is quite natural that Alfred Kazin says “Joe Christmas is the most solitary character in American fiction, the most extreme phase conceivable of American loneliness.”²¹⁾

Next, I want to examine the problem of search for identity in *Absalom, Absalom!*. Charles Etienne Saint-Valery Bon’s situation is similar to that of Joe Christmas in *Light in August*. He was born of the parents, Chales Bon a mulatto and an octoroon woman. That is to say, he is neither a Negro nor a white. After his mother has died he is taken to the Sutpen’s Hundred by Clytie, a mulatto daughter of Thomas Sutpen and brought up by Clytie and Judith, Thomas Sutpen’s white daughter. When he is sleeping between Clytie and Judith at night, he feels dreadfully isolated :

. . . lying there unsleeping in the dark between them, feeling them unasleep too, feeling them thinking about him, projecting about him and filling the thunderous solitude of his despair louder than speech could: *You are not up here in this bed with me, where through no fault nor willing of your own you should be, and you are not down here on this pallet floor with me, where through no fault nor willing of your own you must and will be, not through any fault or willing of our own who would not what we cannot.*²²⁾

This description is very symbolic: the child who is neither a Negro nor a white feels isolated when he is lying between a Negro and a white.

After he has grown up he comes to fight the Negroes. Once he gets into trouble with the Negroes at a Negro ball held in a cabin a few miles from the Sutpen’s Hundred. He marries “a coal black and ape-like woman.”²³⁾ Probably he tries to become a Negro. But neither the Negroes nor the whites regard him as a Negro :

The man apparently hunting out situations in order to flaunt and fling the ape-like body of his charcoal companion in the faces of all and any who would retaliate: the negro stevedores and deckhands on steamboats or in city honky-tonks who thought he was a white man and believed it only the more strongly when he denied it; the white men who, when he said he was a negro, belived that he lied in order to save his skin, or worse: from sheer besotment of sexual perversion; . . .²⁴⁾

In the Sutpen plantation, he “lived like a hermit in the cabin which he rebuilt and where his son was presently born” and he “consorted with neither white nor black.”²⁵⁾ When he is seen in Jefferson he is “either blind or violently drunk in the negro store district on Depot Street.”²⁶⁾

Charles Bon’s situation is more or less dfferent from that of Joe Christmas or that of Charles Etienne Saint-Valery Bon. He is Thomas Sutpen’s first son. But when he is a baby he and his mother, Eulalia Bon, are repudiated by Thomas Sutpen because his mother has some Negro blood. Therefore he has seen his father and he doesn’t know his father. After he has grown up he enters the University of Mississippi and makes friends with Henry Sutpen, Thomas Sutpen’s second son there. By this time he has heard about his father Thomas Sutpen from his mother. When he has an opportunity to come to the Sutpen’s Hundred, he thinks and imagines as follows :

. . . but thinking *So at last I shall see him, whom it seems I was bred up never to expect to see, whom I had even learned to live without*, thinking maybe how he would walk into the house and see the man who made him and then he would know ; there would be that flash, that instant of indisputable recognition between them and he would know for sure and forever—thinking maybe *That's all I want. He need not even acknowledge me ; I will let him understand just as quickly that he need not do that, that I do not expect that, will not be hurt by that, just as he will let me know that quickly that I am his son, . . .*²⁷⁾

Charles Bon wants his father to recognize him as his son. But what he wants is not a formal recognition but “the physical touch” even though it is in secret and hidden and “the living touch of that flesh warmed before he was born by the same blood.”²⁸⁾ Nevertheless Thomas Sutpen never recognizes Charles Bon as his son. Charles Bon’s feeling is shown clearly in the following sentences :

*Maybe he will write it then. He would just have to write ‘I am your father. Burn this’ and I would do it. Or if not that, a sheet, a scrap of paper with the one word ‘Charles’ in his hand, and I would know what he meant and he would not even have to ask me to burn it. Or a lock of his hair or a paring from his finger nail and I would know them because I believe now that I have known what his hair and his finger nails would look like all my life, could choose that lock and that paring out of a thousand.*²⁹⁾

Charles Bon falls in love with Henry’s sister Judith and tries to marry her. Though Thomas Sutpen tells Henry that Charles Bon is his brother in order to prevent Charles Bon from marrying Judith, he never recognizes Charles Bon to his face. Then Charles Bon says as follows :

‘He should have told me. He should have told me, myself, himself. I was fair and honorable with him. I waited. You know now why I waited. I gave him every chance to tell me himself. But he didn’t do it. If he had, I would have agreed and promised never to see her or you or him again. But he didn’t tell me. I thought at first it was because he didn’t know. Then I knew that he did know, and still I waited. But he didn’t tell me. He just told you, sent me a message like you send a command by a nigger servant to a begger or a tramp to clear out. Dont you see that?’³⁰⁾

Charles Bon longs for his father’s recognition, but he can never be recognized by his father. This is the state of his isolation.

Joe Christmas, Charles Etienne Saint-Valery Bon, and Charles Bon are the people who search for identity and suffer from isolation caused by the Negro blood. After all, the tragedies of these three characters are the tragedies of mulattoes.

III

Joe Christmas is born as an illegitimate child. When he grows to know, he doesn’t know his parents at all. And though his Negro blood is putative, his grandfather, a fanatical Calvinist makes him convinced that he has some Negro blood in him. Therefore he doesn’t

know what he is and which he is, Negro or white. As he doesn't know his own identity, he is quite isolated. He tries to escape from his isolation. That is to say, he searches for his identity and tries to become a human being by associating with many people, Negroes and whites. But he can't get along well with Negroes because of his perverse character which is distorted by severe Calvinism and violent racism. However, as white people regard him not as Joe Christmas but as an abstract Negro, he can't get along well with white people. Consequently, he can't find out his identity and he can't become a human being until he dies. He can't escape from being an abstract Negro, therefore he is quite isolated throughout his life. Thus he is forced to be isolated by his environment, severe Calvinism and violent racism of the South.

Charles Bon's situation and Charles Etienne Saint-Valery Bon's situation are a little bit different from that of Joe Christmas. But these three persons have common things. They don't know their identity. And it comes from their Negro blood. They can't find out their identity because of influences of racism. Therefore, in a sense, their isolation is caused by racism. Considering these things above mentioned, I can't help thinking that Faulkner criticizes severe Calvinism and violent racism of the South in these two novels.

要約

『八月の光』のジョー・クリスマスは私生児として生まれ、物心ついた時には両親はなく、自己の正体が全くわからない。さらに、狂信的なカルヴィニズムの信者である祖父が、彼の中には黒人の血が混じっていると思ひこませたがために、自分が黒人か白人なもわからないという状況になる。自己の正体がわからないが故に彼は孤独であり、孤独からのがれるために自己の正体を見いだそうとする。しかし、カルヴィニズムや人種差別によってゆがめられた人格のために、黒人とうまくやってゆくことはできず、白人は彼をただ黒人と見るのみで彼の人格を認めないが故に、彼は白人ともうまくやってゆけない。そのために彼は最後まで自己の正体を見いだせず、環境によって孤独な生活をしいられるのである。

『アブサロム、アブサロム!』のチャールズ・ボン、チャールズ・エティエンヌ・サン＝ヴァレリー・ボンの状況はクリスマスのそれとはやや異なるものの、彼らもまた、黒人の血のために、自己の正体を見いだせない人々である。以上のことを考えると、フォークナーはこれら二つの作品において、南部の厳しいカルヴィニズムや激しい人種差別を批判していると思わずにはいられない。

Notes

- 1) Faulkner, William : *Light in August*, 27, Harrison Smith and Robert Haas (1932)
- 2) *Ibid.*, 357
- 3) *Ibid.*, 354
- 4) Longley, John L., Jr. : *The Tragic Mask : A Study of Faulkner's Heroes*, 196, University of North Carolina Press (1963)
- 5) Faulkner, *Light in August*, 362
- 6) Waggoner, Hyatt H. : *William Faulkner : From Jefferson to the World*, 105, University of Kentucky Press (1959)

- 7) Faulkner, *Light in August*, 111
- 8) *Ibid.*, 363
- 9) *Ibid.*, 210
- 10) *ibid.*, 212
- 11) *Ibid.*, 212
- 12) *Ibid.*, 212
- 13) *Ibid.*, 212
- 14) *Ibid.*, 107
- 15) *Ibid.*, 106
- 16) Kazin, Alfred : "The Stillness of *Light in August*," in *Faulkner : A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Robert Penn Warren, 151, Prentice-Hall (1966)
- 17) Faulkner, *Light in August*, 250~251
- 18) Longley, 199
- 19) Faulkner, *Light in August*, 108
- 20) *Ibid.*, 313
- 21) Kazin, 151~152
- 22) Faulkner, William : *Absalom, Absalom !*, 198, Random House (1936)
- 23) Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom !*, 205
- 24) *Ibid.*, 206
- 25) *Ibid.*, 209
- 26) *Ibid.*, 209
- 27) *Ibid.*, 319
- 28) *Ibid.*, 319
- 29) *Ibid.*, 326
- 30) *Ibid.*, 341